

NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS PERSPECTIVE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
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The purpose of this study is to determine where Native American students gain their perspectives of post-secondary education and who influences those choices. There has been much publicity about statistics on drop-out rates for Native American students and their absence at post-secondary level schools. These statistics reflect a significantly higher level than the average. Recognizing these facts gives importance for educators to assist students in developing positive perspectives about education in general and post-secondary education in particular.

It has long been touted that experiential exposure to post-secondary schools at the critical middle school years is a possible solution to improved student attitude toward higher education. Traditionally, research has shown that students involved in experiential, hands-on type of activities achieved more, liked the curriculum more and improved their attitude and skills more than did students

in traditional, textbook-based classrooms. Hence, it is predictable that students would like activity-based, hands-on experience more than textbook generated exploration of the college experience.

The study addressed middle school students at Lac du Flambeau Public School in Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The successful education of Native American students in both the K-12 school system and post-secondary schools is a major concern in America today. It is a tool that gives insight and understanding of the world. Society's dependence on quality education and technology is increasing (Koballa & Rice 1985). This increased dependence is reflected in the nation's changing employment picture in which careers that require community college or technical institute training are increasing (Koballa 1988).

There has been much publicity about statistics on drop-out rates for Native American students and their absence at post-secondary level schools. These statistics reflect a significantly higher level than the average. Dropout rates for American Indians are not systematically reported as they are for larger groups of color in the United States. "But, given the general educational status of American Indians on other measures of school success that indicate that their situation is comparable to that of African Americans and Latinos, their dropout rates may likewise be as high or higher (Banks 1997). Bureau of Census statistics reported high

school completion rates in 1993 to be 70.4 percent for African American and 53.1 percent for Latinos (Banks 1997). Recognizing these facts gives importance for educators to assist students in developing positive attitudes about education in general and post-secondary education in particular.

Since the increased need for formal education is a reality in American society, the question is how can enhanced positive attitudes towards it be achieved? It is true that schools in general are not producing students who are sufficiently influenced with positive feelings toward education (Stimpson 1990). Hurd declared a particularly important period to affect student's interest and course selection is during the junior high school years (Hurd 1978). Schibeci noted in his review of attitude research in education that positive attitudes appear to decline as students progress to higher grades (Koballa 1988). When these factors are applied to the Native American student, the crisis appears even greater. Most educators are cognizant of the fact that many Native American students are consistently disinterested in higher education.

It has long been touted that experiential exposure to post-secondary schools at the critical middle school years is a possible solution to improved student attitude towards higher education. Traditionally, research has shown that students involved in experiential, hands-on types of activities achieved more, liked the curriculum more and improved their attitude and skills more than did

students in traditional, textbook-based classrooms. Hence, it is predictable that students would like activity-based, hands-on experience more than textbook generated exploration of the college experience.

Research seems to conclude that Indians in general have a different view of education. The education of Native American children has traditionally been

adapted from the Euro-American model. However, prior to the “immigrants” arrival, there existed a holistic approach to the education of the Native American child. They were forced to enter the Euro-American education model and in turn received the message that their traditional method of education was inferior. Their language and culture were portrayed as “deficient” and they were forced to adopt a culture that was “superior” to theirs. Thus, traditionally, many have held misconceptions and distrust for education.

The search for a successful strategy, approach, or technique in Indian education that overcomes the problems of divergent cultures in contact is imperative. Examining all possible factors that contribute to the problem is essential. For the purpose of this investigation only one key approach is to be examined. It has been proposed that one approach holding promise is that of experiencing first hand a college campus through a personal visit. This approach seems to help in the development of a healthy self-concept for Indian students as they can see the environment of a higher educational arena and the possibility to

participate in it themselves.

Statement of the Problem

Given that only 93,000 out of 1.5 million Native Americans attend or have attended post-secondary schools (Haynes 1991), where do Native American students gain their perspectives of post-secondary education and what influences their choices?

Students from Lac du Flambeau Indian Reservation attending Lakeland Union High School in Minocqua, WI., also reflect the national statistics. Of the twenty-one Lac du Flambeau students who graduated from high school in the 1999-2000 school year, only six have made plans to attend some form of post-secondary education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine where middle school Native American students develop their perspective toward higher education. A review of research projects shows that students involved in personal programs achieved more, liked the idea of attending post-secondary schools more and improved positively their perspective toward higher education, more than did students in traditional, textbook-based classroom examinations of higher educational possibilities (Shymansky 1982).

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with thirty-seven Native American middle school students who were enrolled in a Northern Wisconsin kindergarten through eighth grade public school in Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin. The public school is located on reservation land. The study was conducted during the 1999-2000 school year and was completed within sixty days of its onset.

Definition of Terms

For the convenience of the reader and so that terms used in this research proposal would be understood in their proper context, the following definitions were applied:

Perspective: A learned predisposition reflecting a favorable or unfavorable manner toward an attitude or object.

Perspective Toward Post-Secondary Education: A general and enduring positive or negative feeling about post-secondary education.

Middle School Student: Used in this study to mean any student enrolled in grades seventh or eighth.

Native American Reservation: Ceded territory from the United States government to a nation of indigenous people. Considered a sovereign nation, governed by the tribe that inhabits the confines of the territory.

Native American: Used synonymous with American Indian native peoples, first Americans to mean a person who identifies with being a member of one or more federally recognized tribes in the United States.

Learning Style: The way an individual student processes information.

Over-age students: Exceeds chronological age of appropriate grade level.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review was to investigate research studies that have been concerned with Native American students' perspectives toward post-secondary education and the ethno-cultural factors that influence attitudes toward post-secondary education was additionally examined.

History of Native American Education

The education of Native American children has been adapted from the Euro-American model. The education of Indian children prior to the arrival of the “immigrants” was an holistic education (Heart 1992). Native people were forced to conform to the Euro-American model of education. The message received by

Indian people was that their culture and language were uncivilized. Native languages and culture was portrayed as “deficient” and Indians were forced to adopt a culture “superior” to theirs (Heart 1992).

According to one U.S. Department of Education report, about eight percent of American Indian students attend Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) tribal schools, while the remaining ninety-two percent attend public or private schools, most of those with a less than twenty-five percent American Indian student enrollment (Banks 1997).

Failed attempts to adequately educate Native Americans have been documented by numerous studies and congressional reviews over the decades. Various federal and public programs have sought to mainstream Indian people and have ignored their traditional cultural values and heritage in the implementation of educational programs for them (Gipp 1991). Although Indian leaders and parents recognize education as offering hope, emphasis on it is often relegated to the far end of the spectrum in the daily struggle for survival. These conditions can also further undermine tribal and program leadership, contributing to the instability of governments and programs, which ultimately affects their ability to provide an environment conducive to a meaningful learning process (Gipp 1991).

Native Americans are Visual Learners

Within the last two decades researchers have investigated the visual approach that many Indian groups use as a method by which they come to know and understand the world (Noel 2000). There is a great deal of evidence that the majority of schools with Native American students are not adequately adapting to the needs of the students and making their instruction effective. Educational statistics indicate underachievement, absenteeism, over-aged students, and high drop-out rates for Indian students. More subjective evaluations include negative educational goals, low levels of aspiration, and low socio-economic status (Gilliland 1988). Every child has his own learning style, the way in which he learns most easily. Some are auditory learners, others visual. The majority of

Native American students, however, are visual learners who have developed their knowledge by observation and their skills through demonstration and imitation. They seem to learn best by starting with the larger concept, the whole picture, then learning to see the parts (Gilliland 1988).

Barriers to Native Americans Involvement in Post-Secondary Education

According to Indian Nations at Risk, Final Report of the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (1991), native children must overcome a number of barriers if schools are to succeed in their mission to educate:

Limited opportunities to enrich their language and developmental skills during their preschool years.

An unfriendly school climate that fails to promote appropriate

academic, social, cultural, and spiritual development among many Native students.

Curriculum presented from a purely Western(European) perspective, ignoring all that the historical perspective of American Indians and Alaska Natives has to contribute.

Extremely high dropout rates, especially in urban schools, where Natives are in the minority and where the school climate does not support Native students.

A lack of Native educators as role models.

Limited access to colleges and universities because of insufficient funding (p. 7).

The summary of most research studies show several concerns affecting Native American students choices for post-secondary education involvement. The

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (1995) found that these included:

disproportionately high dropout rate resulting in an insufficient number of role models in mathematics and science teaching positions

inadequate parent involvement

lack of effective counseling services that would encourage enrollment in science, mathematics, and technology

unfamiliar language of science and mathematics

ethnic discrimination

sex discrimination toward girls.

Perhaps the greatest danger facing Indian education today is the increasing use of standardized test in all facets of education. Young minority students who do not do well on these tests are put in special education programs rather than culturally appropriate programs. High School students are tracked into non-college bound curriculums based on achievement tests, and college students are denied access to professional programs (Gilliland 1988).

Native American Students' Perspectives Toward Education

In a study on attitude and related concepts in education, Koballa reported the existence and relationships between attitude and cultural backgrounds (Koballa 1988). Although his report gave no substantive offerings on understanding this relationship, it did reaffirm that all attitudes are learned from experience.

In a report on high school dropouts among Native Americans, Coladarci (1983) summarized results of a study done in 1980 in a Montana school district composed of ninety percent Native American students. Coladarci noted that a key factor in the students' decision to discontinue their education was the content of schooling. Approximately twenty-five percent of Native American students in the study felt school was not important to them as Native Americans. Some correlation appeared in the study between the dropout decision and the belief by the student that the curriculum did not adequately include Native American culture. Coladarci believes that adolescents who particularly identify with their

culture can easily be dissatisfied with a school district that shows little awareness or sensitivity to their identity. It was Coladarci's opinion that schools with a predominantly Native American student body need to assess their present curricula and instruction in terms of its impact on student's attitudes toward education.

LeBrasseur and Freark (1982) in a report on ways to teach American Indian children state that education has always been a key part of American Indian life. They indicate that it is through oral transmission that tradition, philosophy and tribal history have been passed down through no formal educational system. LeBrasseur and Freark feel strongly that the educational system must adapt to the needs of the Indian student. They urge educators to develop specific teaching strategies for Native American students, who represent values that are unique and culturally different.

Ethno-Cultural Factors

Although Native Americans are among the fastest growing ethnic groups, educators and counselors frequently understand little about their cultural heritage and customs (Safran1994). Native American individuals have complex combinations of a general Native American background, unique tribal perspectives, as well as their own personal development (Safran1994).

Native American life is an unhurried, never-ending process, with a basic philosophy of "live and let live." At its center is the attainment of a harmonious

relationship between all living things and nature. Traditional Native American lifestyle emphasizes reflection on the environment; the mission here is to maintain the natural balance (Safran1994).

Native American children often learn about their world through careful, persistent observation. This focused observation, private self-testing, and demonstration of the task for approval are essential aspects of learning; children will only actively participate after they are sure of their ability. Native societies encourage children to explore and to be independent with the deliberate intention that they will err, but will learn from their mistake (Safran1994). Historically, in native societies there were no written languages. All traditions, history, religious rites, and lifestyles were passed from one generation to another orally (Safran1994).

Career Development Issues

Native individuals present unique career development issues because of their development and membership in their cultures (Herring 1999). Most ethnic minority students display less satisfaction with school program choices and give lower ratings on receiving help with job choice and career decisions than do European American students. These weaknesses contribute to a lack of self-awareness when Native students contemplate career options. Research also

indicates that ethnic minority students exhibit differences from European American students in background experience, values and orientation. These differences also tend to restrict a Native students awareness of available careers and of the skills required, which occur even though ethnic minority students' aspirations may equal or surpass those of middle-class European American students. As a result, disproportionate numbers of Native students enter traditional career areas or remain unemployed (Herring 1999).

Summary

Specific statistics on American Indian students, such as achievement profiles, are not generally presented by organizations such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which routinely gathers assessment data and does correlational statistics based on ethnicity.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as cited in Banks (1997), the reason for this lack of information is because of the fact that American Indians and Alaska Natives make up only one percent of school enrollment in the United States.

In the U.S. Department of Education document (1995, p. iii), also cited in Banks, the following explanation was presented:

These students and the schools and teachers who serve them are almost never represented in sufficient numbers in national education studies to permit reliable and valid generalizations about their characteristics. Furthermore, because of factors such as tribal and linguistic diversity, geographic dispersion and preponderance in remote rural areas, most national studies have found it too costly to add supplemental samples to address issues of concern to American Indians and Alaska Native education (Banks 1997).

The fact that there is little tracking and reporting on this population, by organizations such as NAEP and the National Center for Education Statistics, creates an unknowing vacuum when it comes to addressing the needs of American Indian students (Banks 1997).

This review of literature addressed studies that showed that Native American students perspectives of higher education were affected by outside influences. Many of these are negative, as a result of a forced Eurocentric education that doesn't include the context of their lives as Native Americans. For Native American students the research indicated that ethno-cultural factors are an integral part of developing positive perspectives toward post-secondary education. Additional research is needed in specific areas to assess the influence of their choices.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to attempt to determine where Native American students develop their perspectives toward higher education.

This chapter discusses the following topics: sample, instrumentation, collection of data, treatment of data, and summary.

Sample

The sample included thirty-seven eighth grade students in a public elementary school located in a small reservation community in northern Wisconsin. There are 440 kindergarten through eighth grade students in the school. The community is ninety percent Native American and the school population is ninety-six percent Native American.

It should be noted that some of the students had already participated in a personal visit to a college campus before the onset of the study. The balance of the students had not participated in a college campus visit before or during the study.

Instrumentation

The perspective toward post-secondary education of each student in the sample was determined by the administration of a twenty-six item survey. The survey was developed by the researcher with input from both previous studies and professional collaboration. The survey was given to all of the students in the sample (Appendix A).

Directions for administering the survey were provided by the researcher. Monitoring was restricted to insure the survey was completed correctly. Names or other identifying data were not recorded on the survey sheets. The researcher collected the surveys face down to avoid the appearance of scrutinizing responses.

These steps were taken to encourage true responses and reduce faking by the students.

Collection of Data

The researcher contacted the administration of the school district to obtain permission for the administration of the survey (Appendix B).

The sample consisted of fifteen students who had experienced a college campus visit. The balance of the sample was composed of the twenty-two eighth grade students in the district who had not participated in a college campus visit.

All of the students were administered the survey on the same day by the researcher.

Treatment of the Data

After the data was collected from the students, the researcher individually evaluated the responses. Care was taken to note the responses given by both students who participated in a college campus visit and those who did not.

Summary

This study was designed to determine what influences Native American students' perspectives toward higher education. Included in the design were descriptions of the population in the study. Further discussed was the type of

survey instrument used and how the data was collected.

Chapter IV

Results

Introduction

The goals of this study were to determine how perspectives are developed toward post-secondary education in middle school Native American students .

Sample

The sample consisted of thirty-seven students in the eighth grade. All of the students were taught guidance using a content oriented instruction strategy. This instruction unit had a duration of three weeks. Fifteen of the students' guidance instruction was supplemented with an actual college campus visit experience.

Presentation of Findings

Of the thirty-seven students who participated in the survey, eighty-seven and a half percent were Native American and twelve and a half percent were Non-Native. Thirty-six students were thirteen years of age at the time of survey and one was fourteen years of age. All the students were in the eighth grade. Twenty-one were males and sixteen were females.

When presented with the question, "What is the level of education your female parent/guardian has completed", there was a mix of responses. Eighteen responded that their female parent/guardian had a high school diploma and nine answered that they had some high school. One had some college, five had college or technical school, two had graduate school and two had no female parent/guardian present. When presented with the question, "What is the level of education your male parent/guardian has completed", the responses varied. Fourteen responded that they had a high school diploma and six answered they

had no male parent/guardian present. Four had some high school, six had college or technical school and five had some college. There were two no responses.

Of the thirty-seven students who participated in the survey, fifteen had visited a college campus, while twenty-two had not visited a college campus. When asked which campus/campuses they had visited, fifteen of the students answered, University of Wisconsin-Stout. When asked the question what did they like best about the campus/campuses, the answers varied from living in the dorms to the food, sport programs and school programs offered.

Twenty-one responded yes to “Do you plan on going to college/technical school after high school?” Sixteen responded no to that same question. When asked who has influenced their decision about higher education, thirty-four responded that their teacher influenced their decision, twenty-two said a relative, twenty said a parent, and eleven said a friend.

Thirty-five of the thirty-seven students felt that their parents would support their decision to further their education, while two felt they would not. Thirty-three said they have thought about what they are going to do after high school and four said they had not.

Seventeen of the students said they have a relative currently going to college/technical school or one that had already gone. Twenty did not have a relative that had attended or was currently attending a post-secondary institution. Twenty-three of these students said their parent/guardian has talked to them about higher education, while fourteen said they had not talked to them. When asked if they thought programs should be available to bring students to visit

college/technical school campuses, Thirty-four answered yes and three answered no.

Overall, the majority of the thirty-seven students surveyed included some form of post-secondary education in their future plans. The range of this post-secondary education went from one to two year vocational schools to four year programs and beyond.. Those that did not indicate post-secondary education as part of their plans still formulated concrete plans beyond high school. These plans included military service, athletic endeavors and even aspirations to become a tribal chairman.

A very encouraging result of this survey was the fact that all students currently plan on completing their high school education. The researcher was also pleased to note that college campus visits were viewed favorably by all thirty-seven students. When presented with the question, “What would be most helpful in making a decision about post-secondary education after high school?”, many students responded that a campus visit would provide great benefits in their decision making process. Even those students who where unable to participate in an actual college campus visit felt that these visits would be beneficial for them. It appears that discussion among their peers who participated in a campus visit served to generate enthusiasm for such visits.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine where Native American students gain their perspectives of post-secondary education and what influences their choices.

This study showed that those students who had participated in a campus tour had a more positive outlook on their future and they had a greater propensity to choose post-secondary education as a part of their life.

While all students reflected a generally positive perspective toward post-secondary education, the study seemed to show that students' perspectives were enhanced as a result of a campus visit. Additionally, at least some of the positive attitudes toward post-secondary education must also attributed to the level of parental education and parental influence. Another factor that must be considered is the influence of students relatives attending post-secondary schools. These factors are certainly a building block for the future as more and more Native Americans become involved in post-secondary education.

Chapter V

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to determine how middle school Native American students develop perspectives toward post-secondary education.

For those Native American students, who did not participate in the campus visitation activities, the survey reflected that, although they had a fairly positive perspective of higher education, the propensity to attend a post-secondary institution was not as high. The influence in the home to achieve higher education did not seem as pronounced. Many of them were more influenced by teachers in the school to gain insight and information about post-secondary education. This implies the significance of the role of teachers in being knowledgeable about post-secondary options and working hand in hand with counseling staff who usually have this responsibility.

At the end of the study those students who participated in the campus visit had a more positive perspective of higher education. Although the influence in the home to achieve post-secondary education was also prevalent, they were still more influenced by the teachers in the school to gain insight and information about post-secondary education.

This research, despite the generally positive outcome, is far from conclusive on the issue studied. The results of this study are limited to the population sample, the college campus visited, the brevity of the study and the fact that the researcher was the counselor/instructor for all the students in the

study.

Additional studies need to be made with a variety of campuses visited for comparison purposes. Comparative studies could also be done with other Native American populations from different localities. A study could also cover a longer time frame to evaluate the effectiveness of campus visitations on post-secondary educational choices for Native American students.

Developing a curriculum that serves to enhance post-secondary perspectives and to keep Native American students keen on higher educational pursuits should be an ongoing priority of educators and counselors. Despite the limitations of this study, the researcher will let the data presented speak for itself. The components of this study appear to work at least for the short term and will hopefully play a role in changing guidance curriculum for the better for the Native American student.

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Appendix

Appendix A

The survey you are about to participate in is totally voluntary and designed for the purpose of establishing where your ideas of post-secondary education come from.

1. Age _____ 2. Sex: Male _____ Female _____

3. Ethnicity

Non-Native
Native American
Hispanic
African American
Other

4. What is the level of education your female parent/guardian has completed?

Some High School
High School diploma
Some college
College or Technical School graduate
Graduate School
No female parent/guardian

5. What is the level of education your male parent/guardian has completed?

Some High School
High School diploma
Some college
College or Technical School graduate
Graduate School
No male parent/guardian

6. Have you ever visited a college campus?

Yes ____ No ____

7. If you answered yes to the above question, please state which campus/campuses you have visited and with whom.
8. What did you like about the campus/campuses?
9. What didn't you like about the campus/campuses?
10. What questions did it answer for you?
11. Would you like to visit more campuses?
12. If you answered no to question 5, would you like to visit a campus or other campuses?
Yes ____ No ____
13. What campus/campuses would you like to visit?
14. Do you plan on going to College/technical School after high school?
Yes ____ No ____
15. Who has influenced your decision about higher education?
(Please check all that apply)
Parent ____
Relative ____
Teacher ____
Friend ____
Other ____ (Please list) _____
16. What are your concerns/questions about higher education?

17. What are your interests about higher education?

18. Would you parent(s)/guardian support a decision to further your education?

Yes ___ No ___

19. Why or why not?

20. Have you thought about what you are going to do after high school?

Yes ___ No ___

21. What are your plans after high school?

22. Do you have relatives that are currently going to College/technical School or relatives that have already gone to College/technical School?

Yes ___ No ___

23. Has your parent/guardian talked to you about higher education?

Yes ___ No ___

24. If you answered “yes” to the above question, what have they told you about higher education?

25. Do you think programs should be available to bring students to visit College/technical school campuses?

Yes ___ No ___

26. Overall, what would be most helpful to you in making a decision about going on to school after high school?



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May 8, 2000

To whom it may concern:

Please be advised that Lesley Morrison, a guidance counselor at Lac du Flambeau Public School, has been using a career guidance curriculum in her Developmental Guidance classes for 7th and 8th graders. As part of this curriculum she has included campus visits for a selected group of 7th graders and 8th graders. At the completion of the survey the entire 8th grade class visited a college campus. This trip is traditional done at the end of the school year.

Under the direction of Ms. Morrison the above described curriculum has proven to not only receive a favorable response from the students, but also from their parents. It is anticipated that this part of the curriculum will continue to be included as part of the Developmental Guidance class.

Sincerely,

Ronald P. Grams
 Principal